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# THE REAL SECRET DIPLOMACY

BY G. K. CHESTERTON

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**THERE** is in England a body of opinion called the Union of Democratic Control, to which I have not myself the honor to belong, but the title and aims of which embody very lucidly and thoroughly almost all that I think about the problems of the war. The very name is a fine and sufficient summary of nearly everything which I shall attempt to say here. If there is one thing in which I have always essentially and literally believed it is democratic control; which is (it should be noted) something much more extreme and drastic than democratic consent. I believe that the people can rule, and that when it does rule, it does so better than any of its rulers. Even where it is unjustly forbidden to rule, and appears only to dissolve and destroy, I am disposed to defend it; I believe that no human institution in history has really so little to be ashamed of as the mob. And when the Union of Democratic Control passes to its more particular object, it satisfies me even more fully. It aims chiefly at eradicating that evil craft of secret diplomacy, by which princes and privileged men cynically make and unmake kingdoms and republics as they roll and unroll cigarettes; and no more think of consulting the citizens of the state than of consulting all the blades of grass before bargaining for the sale of a field. This detestable detachment, inherited from the heartless dynastic ambitions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, has been covered in my own time and my own society by the large and optimistic advertisements of what is called Imperialism. I can say without fear or penitence that I have always hated and always done my hardest to extirpate Imperialism, as an ambition of any country, and above all, as an ambition of my own.

It is indeed true that the members of the Union of Democratic Control do not agree with any of these principles,

with which I myself agree so ardently when I read them in their official literature. If it be counted some sort of reflection on a society that its mere individual membership does not happen to include any person who assents to its printed formulæ, the U. D. C. may be held to suffer from such a disadvantage. Of the most eminent member, Mr. E. D. Morel, I can only say that his warm admirers, while agreeing as to the thoroughness of his enthusiasm, are apparently doubtful only about its object; and that in any case the mere evisceration of secret diplomacy can hardly be supposed to satisfy or explain it. He is himself so eminently secret a diplomatist that there is a doubt, not merely about what it is that he does for his country, but about what country it is that he does it for. The other members are mostly widely respected and well-informed men, famous in almost every branch of culture, and for almost every type of conviction; with the exception of those special and peculiar doctrines with which they are accidentally connected by the formularies of their memberships. Probably the most influential are a group of aristocrats, representing the great governing class families of Trevelyan, Ponsonby, Buxton or Hobhouse, whose tradition it naturally is to perpetuate Burke's antagonism to the theory of the French Revolution. And, indeed, one of them only recently refused to submit himself to any popular vote in his constituency, for the explicit reason that the great Anti-Jacobin, who lies buried at Beaconsfield, would not have approved of a representative paying any attention to anything which he is alleged to represent. But in the plain appeal I am now writing, I am concerned with the principles of the Union of Democratic Control; and I am therefore in no way concerned with any of its members.

To those principles, which condemn an undemocratic diplomacy, it is now necessary to make a new and very urgent appeal. For undemocratic diplomacy has returned in a new and even more undemocratic form. It is not merely that the popular opinion has never been expressed, but that it is censored and silenced when it has been expressed. The acts of a mob can be hidden like the acts of a man. Silence does not rest merely on the momentary negotiation of two or three officials; silence can be spread over the desires of whole populations and the destiny of whole provinces. It is not one diplomatist who wears a mask, but a million democrats who are all required to wear muzzles. The chief example of this

new secret diplomacy is the earnest exhortation addressed to the English and French, that they should qualify the vehemence of their Anti-German feeling, out of consideration for the international idealism either of Petrograd or of Stockholm. Sometimes this modification is recommended as a way of securing peace for the world. Sometimes it is only recommended as a way of securing peace within the Alliance. But upon one point all the Stockholm-Petrograd school of democrats is agreed; and that is the need of imposing silence upon the democracies of the West.

Now, while I agree with the internationalists as to the evil of private understandings, I think it the reverse of an improvement to take refuge in public misunderstandings. I think it a bad thing that diplomatists should secretly arrange the transference of French people to the power of the Emperor of China. But I think it worse to declare that all Frenchmen really desire to be Chinamen, lest any hint of the reverse should ruffle the serenity of the Chinese. I think it bad that white men should be despotically driven into an alliance or a war with black men; but I think it worse that white men should be made to black their faces, for fear of disturbing the solidarity of the human race. It is an evil thing that the people should not choose for themselves, but should be tricked beforehand into having something whether they like it or not. But it is a worse thing that we should not even know what they do like; what they would really choose, or perhaps have already chosen. It is the case against secret diplomacy that the masses are never consulted until it is too late; but it seems to be the upshot of the new Pacifist diplomacy that the masses are never consulted at all. For it is idle to talk of consulting the people, if all their most primary passions and bitterest experiences are to be concealed in the interests of a theoretic humanitarianism. And that, and nothing else, is really the claim of those who insist on the Anti-German feeling in England being qualified by concern for less exasperated feeling in Russia.

Now, it is simply a fact, like death or daylight, that the English people, and especially the English proletariat, regards the German of this war exactly as it regarded the Whitechapel murderer, who ripped up poor girls with a knife. Seeing that the German also, as it happens, has ripped up poor girls with a knife, the parallelism of the sentiment is not perhaps so surprising. The English proletarians desired to

find the Whitechapel murderer and punish him; the English proletarians also desire to find the Germans who commanded these German atrocities and punish them. This is the will of the people, if the will of the people ever existed in this world.

It is now necessary to insert here a most emphatic warning against people being misled upon this point by any such sectional incident as a vote in favor of Stockholm, temporarily upheld by certain representatives of certain English Trades Unions. Such votes are variable and, as a basis of argument, quite unreliable. They are unreliable for three successive and decisive reasons, each final without the other. First, it is admitted, because it cannot be denied, that such schemes of representation are so wildly illogical as to be simply meaningless. We should not think much of a scientific assembly in which the men who believe that the earth is flat had as many representatives as those who cling to the more common opinion that it is round. We should not accept as authoritative a congress of religions in which the Scotch sect of the Upstanding Glassites (now, alas, nearly extinct) was represented by serried rows of delegates, covering as many benches as all the Catholics or all the Mohammedans put together. We should not bow down to a representative system which brought out the remarkable result that as many Englishmen wear sandals as wear boots; or that the earnest students of Scripture who think it wicked to have their hair cut are as numerous as those who observe the rite at more or less reasonable intervals. Yet this was strictly, literally, and indeed admittedly, the composition of the so-called Labor Conference now in question; in which enormous over-representation was given to tiny Pacifist groups holding opinions rather rarer than the opinion that the earth is flat. Second, even this disproportionate and absurd assembly admittedly voted under a complete misapprehension about the most decisive question of fact. They voted because they had been distinctly told that their allies in Russia insisted on a discussion at Stockholm, at which the English case could be put against the German. As a fact, the Russian Revolutionary Government did not so insist. Secondly, therefore, even if the meeting had been representative, it would have voted on a misrepresentation. And, thirdly, even if the fact had not been entirely misrepresented, and if the Trades Unions had been formally and legally represented, there is an obstacle more absolute and unanswerable than all the rest.

It is the fact that no sane man denies the sight of his own eyes and the testimony of his own ears; it is the fact that we deal today with deadly realities, and have no patience for political fictions; it is the fact of the nature of fact. I know that most Englishmen, and especially most poor Englishmen, are furious with the Germans, exactly as I know that most of them think it desirable to wear clothes or prefer cooked meat to raw. The man who pretends to doubt it would pretend to doubt the nose on a man's face, because it slightly differed from the nose in his portrait. Representation, at its best, does not profess to give anything more than a picture or emblem of the multitudinous mind of the people. When that mind is so unanimous and so uproarious that anybody can see it in the street, and almost breathe it in the air, the man who prefers to believe the figure rather than the fact is something very much worse than a lunatic. I stress this parenthesis because I conceive myself primarily to be bearing witness to facts for the benefit of foreign opinion; and whether or no the internationalists think this popular feeling should be gratified, it can do no kind of good, even to their own cause, that they should be simply ignorant of anything so human and so huge.<sup>1</sup>

Now a democrat, for whom democracy is a living conviction and not merely a long word, has nothing whatever to do, *qua* democrat, with the wisdom or perfection of a popular demand as any modification of its political right. When he is sure of the people's will, he must admit the people's authority, if he is a democrat, and if he is also an honest man. That all retribution or expiation is barbaric may be a part of enlightenment, but it is not a part of democracy; and any use of it to evade a general demand is a denial of democracy. To believe that the German criminal will spontaneously repent of his crimes may be in itself charitable, but it is not in itself democratic; and if it is used against the general will it is anti-democratic. Particular men who hold the democratic thesis may also hold that men should not be punished for murdering girls. For that matter, they may hold that men should not be discouraged from murdering girls, or that men should be warmly and enthusiastically urged toward murdering girls. But they do not hold these things as part of the democratic

<sup>1</sup> Since this passage was written it has been more than justified even by the Trades Union Congress, which has itself returned to the popular patriotic view of Stockholm. The passage is now hardly necessary, but it is still true; but it is an understatement of the truth.

thesis; and, if they let them prevail against the general will, they do not believe in the democratic thesis at all. In the case of the English people there is only one possible alternative. Either Germany must pay for the wrong which the people believes it has suffered; or else the people has no right to have an opinion, or no right to express an opinion, or no right to make that opinion prevail.

But it will no doubt be very earnestly urged that an opinion may be democratic in appearance while being very undemocratic in origin. It is implied that the Anti-German feeling in England was officially and therefore artificially produced. It is contended, to summarize briefly what is to be said for this view, that our diplomatists had darker motives for spreading a theory that a British promise when made to Belgium ought to be kept, and that a German promise when made to Belgium ought not to be broken. These intellectual departures, it is implied, were first encouraged by a small knot of officials a few years ago; and so subtly disseminated by them that they have since come to have much the appearance of being the common morality of mankind. In the same way these British sophists so prepared the soil of our mentality, that when a German soldier (in the fulfilment of his native discipline and natural duty) killed the village priest as a punishment for the patriotism of the village atheist, it seemed almost as if we should always have regarded such an action as in some way unreasonable or unjust. The ordinary mass of men (it is argued) would inevitably have thought it natural that the village priest should be regarded as having performed the actions of the village atheist, or even of the village idiot, had not the subtle, fluent, brilliantly eloquent and bewilderingly universal philosophers who are the younger sons of our English county families and the products of our English public schools, misled the multitude by the music of their rhetoric and the audacious novelty of their reasoning. In short, it is explained that our statesmen and diplomatists have managed to persuade us, not only that we have a wholly academic antagonism to the abstract disruption of a compact or disregard of a signature, but that we have also certain detailed grievances, against treating non-combatants as combatants or calling a watering-place a castle. The statesmen have schemed at Westminster and Windsor; the diplomatists have intrigued at Vienna and Petrograd; and so the whole atmosphere of Europe has been gradually heated, until we

fancied there was something alarming about the look of a Zeppelin and imagined some superstitious immunity to have attached to a hospital ship.

I may be excused if I absolve myself from the further strain of stating this thesis seriously; but it is a thesis on which our enemies almost entirely rely. As it happens, it is not only intrinsically imbecile, but is relatively the precise reverse of the fact. It is not so much an injustice to the British Government and governing class as a gross and very excessive compliment to them. It attributes to them much more foresight than they had, and an attitude in which they would since have been entirely justified if only they had had it. It supposes the governing classes to have been the Anti-German influence. As a fact, it was the governing classes who had always been the Pro-German influence, and the only Pro-German influence. It is the real and very damaging joke against the most educated part of England, that for decades past it had been trying to educate the mob, and trying to educate it all wrong. The universities were Pro-German, the fashionable philosophies and religions were Pro-German, the practical politics, the social reform and slumming were all copied from Germany; for it is the whole art of slumming to pay no attention to the opinion of the slums. Only in the slums would you have found already a resentment against the German shopkeeper, more especially as the German shopkeeper was commonly a German Jew. Similarly the great aristocratic statesmen, like Salisbury and Rosebery, kept in close alliance with the German Emperor; the great quarterlies and the graver magazines discussed him as the architect of Germany and the arbiter of Europe. It was only the coarse caricaturists of the gutter who called him then the lunatic they all call him now. If the German controversialist (as is likely enough) were to turn his whole argument upside down, and maintain that the Anti-German movement was an insurgent tide of illiteracy and lawlessness out of the slums, and almost out of the sewers, submerging in a flood of filth the tradition of the English gentry, he might find a vast deal more to be said for that fallacy than for the other. It might be held that the mob had first moved us to hatred of Germany; I should myself add such a fact to my reasons for believing in the mob. But in truth it was not merely the mob, but something more practical still. There was only one thing that could really cure the Pro-German;



and that was the German. And wherever the German passed, there was no more Pro-Germanism.

There is a very obvious and ordinary reason for the English people being more Anti-German than the English Government. It is the simple fact that the German has made even more direct war on the English people than he has on the English Government. It is an argument arising from the plain facts of the physical situation and physical experiences of the island and the islanders. And the simplest and soundest way of stating the argument is to say that the English hate the German because they know him. It is here that all humanitarian generalizations, however true in many cases, about the distant interests of diplomacy and the exclusive information of diplomatists, are in this particular case completely irrelevant and pointless. It is perfectly true that princes and politicians can teach an ignorant people that a far-off foreigner is a fiend; I should say that this was true of our view of Russians in the Crimean War. It is not in the smallest degree true of our view of Germans in this war; for the simple reason that the foreigner is not far off and the people is not ignorant—at least, it cannot possibly be ignorant of the foreigner. And if Englishmen think the foreigner is a fiend, it is solely because they think, rightly or wrongly, that he behaves like a fiend—not to their government, but to them. It was possible to tell a Victorian Englishman that a Russian knouts women and lives on tallow candles; for a Russian, like a Chinaman, was physically so remote as to be unreal; and these fables were told about him because he himself seemed almost fabulous. But it is not necessary to tell a modern Englishman that a Prussian treacherously drowns poor fishermen, or pours poison and flame on peaceful and unprotected villages; any more than it is necessary to tell a modern Englishman that cats eat mice or that mice eat cheese. It is quite useless to say that subtle diplomatists have conspired to misrepresent the mouse; or that an arrogant monarchy is angry with the cat because it looked at a king. That Germany has suffered wrong from our statesmen is arguable; that she has inflicted wrong on our citizens is self-evident. To say that these things are merely incidents of war is merely to quarrel about words. The fact which a democrat will feel important is that fact that this democracy does regard these acts as something much worse than war. The Germans, for instance, have poisoned wells; and the wicked-

ness of poisoning wells has long been an ordinary English proverb and figure of speech. The Germans introduced the use of venomous vapors in battle; and the poor people whose sons and husbands have been "gassed" do in fact speak of them in a style never used about other wars, in which they have been merely wounded. In the presence of this popular feeling all the international talk about quarrels manufactured by governments is perfectly true and perfectly irrelevant. Cynical British statesmen might have poisoned men's minds against Germany. But the indignation is there because men's bodies have been poisoned by Germans. Sensational journalists might have taken away the characters of a race of foreigners. But the feeling has not been created by the taking away of characters, but by the talking away of lives.

This democratic decision was embodied and emphasized in the famous refusal of the Seamen's Trades Union to take Mr. MacDonald to Petrograd. Here again it is quite possible to talk of the intrigues of politicians; and here again it is quite irrelevant. Anyone who chooses is at liberty to say that the strike may not have been spontaneous, or may have been prompted by a secret government order; just as he is free to say that it may have been prompted by an ancient English prejudice against Cossacks or by an ancient Highland feud against MacDonalds. But if anybody says that such a strike *could* not have been spontaneous, or *must* have been prompted from above, he simply knows no more about any kind of poor Englishman than I do about the man in the moon. At any moment any number of any sort of English proletarians might have made an indignant demand for reparation for German piracy. Any number of them at any time would have distrusted the diplomacy of Mr. MacDonald, in so far as they have ever heard of Mr. MacDonald. Whatever prompted that particular strike, there was popular opinion enough to prompt a hundred of such strikes. And popular opinion does sometimes express itself, even through the modern machinery of representative self-government.

The side of the question may be summed up by saying that talk of the intrigues of governments and the slandering of peoples is pointless for a perfectly simple reason. It is, that the popular case against Germany does not rest on the disputed, but on the undisputed things. The things the English denounce are not the things the Germans deny, but the things they cannot deny. The violent perjury which

waged war on a people who had grown up unarmed under a permanent promise of peace, may have been a mere modification of modern diplomatic methods; but there is no doubt that the Germans did it, and no doubt that the English detested it. The launching of enormous airships useless against armies and useful only to create panic by the killing of civilians, may be only a little artistic touch added to the latest scientific armament; but there is no doubt that these machines were regarded with admiration in Germany and with horror in England. The scuttling of poor little boats plying peaceful and ordinary trades may be a mere alteration of detail in international arrangements; but even the Germans will not deny that they do it, and even the Germans will not deny that the English are shocked at it. Here there is no possible question of diplomatic distortions or travelers' tales; the facts are admitted and, in the English popular view, the facts are final.

The matter therefore seems so far to resolve itself into the very simple question of whether the democratic conference of Europe shall or shall not express the real views of the real democracies. If it is to express them, there is not the shadow of a doubt, in the case of the allied peoples in the West, about what those views really are. It is, I suppose, physically possible (though morally most improbable) that they should be forced to renounce these opinions by the prolonged torture of a pitiless war; just as it is possible for a philosopher to be forced to renounce his opinions on the rack. But that is not the procedure now most favored in the enlightened school of international democracy, as a method of finding out a man's opinions. It is presumably possible in the abstract that we should be physically compelled to pay attention to German proposals, as we might be physically forced to pay ransom to a brigand; but we should not say he was an international fellow-worker; we should say he was a blackmailer as well as a brigand. The fact remains that, upon the worst and wildest possibility, our public testimony could only be Pacifist if it were tortured or terrorized; it could not possibly be so as long as it was true. I repeat therefore that the question simply is whether the democracies are to dare to say what they mean; or whether a few self-appointed public orators are to announce to the world that they mean something else, which we all know they do not mean. This strikes me as involving a degree of meekness and self-effacement in the masses infi-

nitely more abject and absolute than that demanded by the old despotic foreign policy of which I have always disapproved. We talk of denouncing secret diplomacy; but at least the diplomacy did not have to be secret. That a policy was concealed from the people was itself a confession of the power of the people. Princes and chancellors hid themselves in dark places from a thing like a thunder-cloud or a deluge: democracy. But now a man may say in broad daylight that all democrats believe that black is white; and it must be received in religious silence. For those who were once hailed throughout the world as democrats are democrats no longer. The democrats have all become diplomatists. In truth, we have all become secret diplomatists, and must forever hide our hearts from each other; for in each will be the dark tale of a justice which we desired and dared not demand.

G. K. CHESTERTON.